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# The Theme of Art and Life in Selected Jeanette Winterson's Novels

Téma umění a života ve vybraných románech Jeanette Wintersonové

Bakalářská práce

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis, titled “The Theme of Art and Life in Selected Jeanette Winterson’s Novels” is the result of my own work and that I used only the cited sources.

Prague, June 10th, 2013 ……..

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore the theme of art in Jeanette Winterson's novels with special attention given to the relationship between art and life in her aesthetic system. The theoretical part of this work is concerned with describing Winterson's philosophy of art and defining it as a combination of modern and postmodern elements. The practical part deals with three novels, *Written on the Body* (1992), *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) and *Art & Lies* (1994), and explores how the theme of art and life is developed in each of these works.

Key words: modernism; postmodernism; stories and archetypes; experimental literature; imagination and reality; physical and spiritual.

Abstrakt

Cílem této bakalářské práce je definovat téma umění v novelách Jeanette Winterson. Zvláštní pozornost je věnována vztahu umění a života v estetickém systému této autorky. Teoretická část práce se zaměřuje na popis autorčiny filozofie umění a na její vymezení jakožto kombinaci moderních a postmoderních prvků. Praktická část pracuje se třemi novelami, a sice *Written on the Body* (1992), *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) a *Art & Lies* (1994), přičemž úkolem této části práce je doložit, jak se téma umění a života promítá v těchto konkrétních dílech.

Klíčová slova: modernismus; postmodernismus; příběhy a archetypy; experimentální literatura; fantazie a realita; tělesno a duševno.

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# 1 Introduction

Jeanette Winterson is famous for touching upon the theme of female sexuality and for undermining the concept of gander in her fiction. Since these issues are rather delicate and controversial, most critics and journalists have chosen this perspective to write about Winterson's novels. At the same time, there are many sides to her work that remain unexplored, the writer's aesthetic views as well as their realization in her novels among them.

Ironically, Winterson herself has always expressed great interest in the problems of aesthetics. Not only is the theme of art present in all her novels, she also wrote a book of essays *Art Objects* (1995), which can be considered her aesthetic manifesto, and a novel *Art & Lies* (1994), which is a creative realization of her aesthetic principles written, strangely enough, one year before *Art Objects*. Winterson's views on art and its connection to life constitute a complex system at the basis of which lies the author's firm belief in art's power to transform human life. Winterson is convinced that the world bogged down in mass culture and materialism can be saved and renewed through art.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the theme of art in Jeanette Winterson's novels with special attention given to the relationship between art and life in her aesthetic system. The theoretical part of this work is concerned with describing Winterson's philosophy of art and defining it as a combination of modern and postmodern elements. The practical part deals with three novels, *Written on the Body* (1992), *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) and *Art & Lies* (1994), and explores how the theme of art and life is developed in each of these works. The three books were chosen because they represent three types of Winterson's novels: lyrical, autobiographical and philosophical accordingly and therefore demonstrate different approaches to the theme.

## *2* Winterson's Aesthetic System as a Combination of Modern and Postmodern Elements

It has never been a secret that Winterson's sympathies lie with Modernist writers. She said so in her interviews[1] as well as in her book of essays *Art Objects*[2]. Undoubtedly, modernist aesthetic has influenced her philosophy of art as well as her choice of literary devices, but at the same time, being born in 1959 and having published her first book in 1985, she remains a writer of the postmodern era. Of course, it is not only the chronology that makes her a postmodernist, but also her approach to art and her writing style.

The passage from modernism to postmodernism in literature was the transgression from the modern self-reflexive exploration, which was a bearer of universal values, to a different type of self-reflection that openly commented on its inability to have a broad perspective and to introduce universal values into the world[3]. In his essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" Jean Francois Lyotard famously noticed that "the postmodern would be that which puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" [4]. Postmodern art thus openly claims its impotence as it remains unable to attain absolute truth, to introduce absolute good into life and to figure out the difference between valuable and valueless. It can only assert, again and again, the fluidity and instability of reality or, better, any conception of reality, and of personality. In her prose, Winterson constantly undermines notions like gander, identity, reality or truth. In *Written on the Body* she deconstructs the concept of gander by creating a genderless protagonist; in *Why* (*Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*) she deconstructs the notion of identity by demonstrating that identity is always something that people create themselves and that identity can be recreated if it loses its effectiveness. As for reality and truth, her every book is more or less concerned with demonstrating that facts of notional life are not as significant as individual spiritual experience and a person's inner life. Winterson is convinced that the only reality that matters is the "reality of imagination"[5]. Also, she does not believe in the notion of fact, of something that is true in every situation and for every individual. She is convinced that everything that pretends to be a fact is just another subjective version, which was for

[1] Bilger, Audrey. "Jeanette Winterson, the Art of Fiction." *Paris Review* Winter 1997. 14 February 2013
[2] Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects*. London: Vintage Books, 1996. Page 150
[3] Andreia Irina Suciu. *Malcolm Bradbury Between Modernism and Postmodernism.* Bacău: Alma Mater, 2011. Page 23
[4] Lyotard, Jean François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester:Manchester University Press, 1984. Page 14
[5] Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects*. London: Vintage Books, 1996. Page 132

some reason accepted by many people: "The search for the truth is tainted with willing falsehoods. The biographer, hand on heart, violates the past"[6]. This leads her to undermining history as such, which becomes an important theme in *Art&Lies*. In addition, when it comes to her works and their interpretations, she gladly passes the right to decide what is true and what is not to the reader: "I suppose where the great divide comes between true evangelicals and what I do is that I want to hand the process entirely over to the individual and say, There's no book; there are no rules. You must find it for yourself"[7]. Therefore, Winterson's profound individualism is in tune with the postmodern scepticism and relativism.

Simultaneously, it can seem that Winterson did not go as far in her scepticism as most postmodern writers did. Following the modernist tradition, Winterson believes in art, its absolute nature and its power to transform human life. In her book of essays, *Art Objects,* she claims that art is an only force that can reconcile us with time and space, whose eternity is inapprehensible for a human being limited in all possible ways: "We know that the universe is infinite, expanding and strangely complete that it lacks nothing we need, but in spite of this knowledge, the tragic paradigm of human life is lack, loss, finality, a primitive doomsaying that has not been repealed by technology or medical science. The art stays in the way of this doomsaying[8]". According to her, art has a "healing power[9]" as it can improve personality and provide an affective understanding of human nature and condition (through storytelling in the case of literature).[10] Art as a transcendent and universal value is interconnected with many themes in Winterson's fiction, most noticeably with the theme of love. For example, the metaphor of lovemaking as writing is one of the most common tropes in her fiction[11]. Also, in her fictional world art serves as an only alternative to mortifying, hypnotizing mass culture and therefore an only way of salvation from a vulgar and passive existence.

Naturally, Winterson's image of an artist is fundamentally different from a post-modern miserable agent who has lost power over the text[12] as well as his exceptional position in the world: "The common theory of the artist as one possessed is well known, but I think it is truer to call the artist

[6] Winterson, Jeanette. *Art & Lies*. London: Vintage Books, 1995. Page 140
[7] Bilger, Audrey. "Jeanette Winterson, the Art of Fiction." Paris Review Winter 1997. 14 February 2013
[8]Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects*. London: Vintage Books, 1996. Page 19
[9] Ibid., 101
[10] Onega, Susan. *Ethics And Truama in Contemporary British Fiction*. New York: Rodopi, 2011. Page 267
[11] Andermahr, Sonya. *Jeanette Winterson. Hampshire*: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Page 26
[12] Barthes, Ronald. Selected writings. London: Fontana, 1983. Page 96

one in possession of a reality less partial than the reality apprehended by most people"[13]. Logically, all this leads her to the promotion of a serious attitude to art as a whole and to literature particularly.

Winterson is known to say in one of her interviews that "[i]f it doesn't shock it isn't art"[14]. To her, experimentation with form is a way to involve the reader into affective participation and reflexive thought[15]. However, this kind of a transcendent interaction between a writer and a reader is impossible without a special, very serious and time consuming, concentration on a work of art: "Effort of time, effort of money, effort of study, effort of humility, effort of imagination have each been packed by the artist into the art. Is it so unreasonable to expect a percentage of that from us in return"[16]. Calling for an effort together with an intentionally experimental way of presentation and a notion of an artist who is exceptional and powerful points to a certain elitism that undoubtedly is characteristic of Winterson as a theorist and a writer. In fact, in *Art Objects* she says so herselft: "I worry that to ask for effort is to imply elitism, and the charge against art, that it is elitist, is too often the accuser's defense against his or her own bafflement. It is quite close to the remark "Why can't they all speak English?"[17]. Indeed, this attitude is close to modernist elitism and conviction that true art can be understood by very few people. On the other hand, in the interviews Winterson usually sounds quite democratic. On multiple occasions she says that she wants to be read by people with different cultural backgrounds, she even sees it as her mission to "bring the word back to people who are dispossessed of it"[18]. Moreover, she is famous for saying "I think it's rude to write long books"[19] to one of her interviewers. In her opinion, a modern writer has to think about his reader and understand the realities of his or her life, to understand the simple fact that now life is too busy for people to spend their time reading hundreds and hundreds of pages.

As to formal characteristics of her work, Winterson definitely fits in with postmodern poetics. Her novels rely heavily on the techniques like irony (*Why*), parody (*Written on The Body*) and black humor (*Art & Lies*). At the same time, the tone of her novels can get somber and melancholic as it happens in *Art & Lies* where the humorous tone is only extended to the parts devoted to the Bawd (Doll Sneerpiece). This points out to the fragmentariness that is characteristic of all her work. Also,

[13] Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects*. London: Vintage Books, 1996. Page 145
[14] Onega, Susan. *Ethics And Truama in Contemporary British Fiction*. New York: Rodopi, 2011. Page 268
[15] Ibid., 265
[16] Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects*. London: Vintage Books, 1996. Page 16
[17] Ibid., 16
[18] Bilger, Audrey. "Jeanette Winterson, the Art of Fiction." Paris Review Winter 1997. 14 February 2013
[19] Bush, Catherine. "Jeanette Winterson." *Bomb* Spring 1993. 14 February 2013

some of her novels that are not a part of this analysis can be described as historiographic metafiction (*Sexxing the Cherry, The Passion*).

Simultaneously, Winterson's tendency for experimentation with style and her great reliance on stream of consciousness makes her novels rather hard to read. As it was mentioned before, Winterson demands from her reader concentration and serious attitude to reading, which is rather uncommon for a postmodern writer. In addition, she tends to use very poetic language, overburden with metaphors and similes. In her interviews she often insists that the language of literature should be different from the language of everyday life:

> When you give people a book, or when they think about writing a book—which is one reason why so many people write and do it so badly—they don't know how to make the distinction between the language of the everyday and a poetic language. This is absolutely necessary for the stuff of fiction. Unless you are prepared to heighten your language, to intensify it to such an extent that it absolutely leaves behind the commonplace vernacular that we all use in order to get by, then you cannot really say you're a writer. All you're doing is using what's available, and using what's available with no work isn't art[20].

Winterson believes that only by using "intensified" language, the one that is radically different from the colloquial speech, a writer can help people to elevate their lives: "For me, the point has always been to take people who are exiled or come at life at an angle, who are slightly askew to the mainstream vision of the world—which, let's face it, most of us are (the majority is so small I can never find it)—and then to use the glorious power of art, the power of language, to really elevate these lives"[21]. Here, her modernist belief in the power of art to transform lives becomes apparent again.

[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid

# 3 *Written on the Body* as an Attempt to Reinvent Love Narrative

The relationship between art and love form a very important theme in *Written on the Body*. If considered and analyzed, it can help the reader to see the multilayer structure of the book and achieve a deeper understanding of its message and main ideas. The theme of art and life enters the novel through the endless flow of intertextual allusions. Right on the first page there is a quote from *The Tempest*. Straightforward quoting of Shakespeare and concise allusions to his plays will enter the text again and again. Also, Winterson constantly alludes to the Bible, fairy tales, Tolstoy (the protagonist is a professional translator from Russian to English), modernist writers and many others.

Most often allusions enter the text through comparison: "I felt like the girl in the story of Rumpelstiltskin..."[22] or "...you gazed at me the way God gazed at Adam"(18). They play an essential role in characteristics given by Winterson to her characters. For example, when she introduces us to a new character, Judith, nearly the first thing that we get to know about her it the fact that she was "deeply sunk in Conrad"(75). Also, while describing Louise's sexual preferences she author mentions that "she was not a D.H. Lawrence type"(67). Allusions are also used to express certain emotions more precisely: "Perhaps I've died and this is a Judgment Day"(61), or a certain sentiment: "I'm going to warm the room and you're going to lie in the tub and drink this cocoa. All right Christopher Robin?"(61). In fact, it seems that in every situation that requires some lengthy description or explanation Winretson would rather mention a certain character, a certain author or otherwise imply the similarity of the situation in her book and another one that happened in a different text.

One obvious reason for this might be the economy of space and readers' time. It has been mentioned in the theoretical part of this work that Winterson thinks writing long books to be "rude" to people who do not have much time to read today[23]. Naturally, this technical remark cannot possibly explain a writer's excessive use of allusions. One can assume then that its cause lies in her aesthetic views and her goals as a writer.

In one of her interviews Winterson says that "[e]mbedded in all of us, whether we recognize where

[22]Winterson, Jeanette. *Written on the body*. London: Vintage Books, 1993. Page 44
All the subsequent quotes are from this edition and are marked in parenthesis in the text.
[23]Bush, Catherine. "Jeanette Winterson." *Bomb* Spring 1993. 14 February 2013

they're coming from or not, are stories and archetypes and shapes from which we cannot escape except by confronting them"[24]. That is what she does in this novel; she makes the readers to confront the information that is stored deep inside them. She tries to appeal to very simple and basic knowledge that is at the same time very powerful and emotionally charged. In other words, she tries to exploit collective unconscious. In her book of essays *Art Objects* as well as in some of her interviews[25] Winterson mentions that she is familiar with Carl Jung's works, so there can be very little doubt that his concepts had a profound impact on her. In fact, in Winterson's philosophy, Jung's ideas on collective unconscious and archetypes are mixed with her aesthetic views and that leads her to the conclusion that human life is not only influenced, but also shaped by fiction: "Are real people fictions? We mostly understand ourselves through an endless series of stories told to ourselves by ourselves and others"[26]. This is the idea that is expressed through the endless allusions in *Written on the Body*. They create an impression that the novel has an invisible background that is formed by all kinds of stories, from biblical to modern. This background layer illuminates the plot of the book and its characters, makes them more complex and, at the same time, more transparent for readers. It is of high importance that Winterson alludes to narratives that are undoubtedly familiar to her readership (at least her English readership). For example, the most frequent source for her allusions certainly is the Bible. The reason for it is the fact that till this day biblical images remain immensely powerful and popular as well: "[e]veryone knows a few Bible stories and knows about the central Christian myth of miraculous birth, the life, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection. I think you could ask anyone and they would have some idea what you were saying. And therefore from that you can construct a kind of central archetype around which our ideas are formed"[27]. Thus, using images that are recognizable and accessible to everyone, she creates more intimate relationship between the reader and the text. Not only do we know what she writes about when she says "you gazed at me the way God gazed at Adam"(18), but we can also feel it.

The fact that Winterson uses very basic and uncomplicated images in her allusions (and thus revives only well-known stories connected to them) demonstrates her intention to control her text as well as her reader. At this point, she does not want the text to have multiple interpretations. Her endings breed grounds for endless speculation, her images do not and this is intentional. Indeed, Winterson

[24]Ibid.
[25]Bilger, Audrey. "Jeanette Winterson, the Art of Fiction." *Paris Review* Winter 1997. 14 February 2013
[26]Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects*. London: Vintage Books, 1996. Page 59
[27]Bilger, Audrey. "Jeanette Winterson, the Art of Fiction." *Paris Review* Winter 1997. 14 February 2013

is known for her active aesthetic position. The relationship between art and life for her is direct; she sees correlation between them. She perceives art as a power that has to influence life and ideally change it for the better. As a writer, she longs to accomplish this formidable task by making people see their lives from a new angle: "I think the concerns of a writer are how to make things new, how to shock, how to revive the commonplace, how to take the banal, everyday experience and make it into something specific which has resonance—so that people see their lives not simply offered before them as a photograph might be in a flat, two-dimensional way but offered with proper resonance, magnified"[28]. To do this she uses a certain kind of style and an essential component of this style is very vivid, precise and straightforward imagery that can communicate effectively with readers. However, at the same time she comes across the problem of clichés. Surprisingly, never going too far from the area of common knowledge, she manages to avoid any kind of them. It is important to analyze how Winterson manages to bring new and bright meaning and emotion into overused phrases and words.

The most obvious way to do this is to consider her biblical allusions. As mentioned above, she only uses terms that are familiar to her readership, Judgment Day and Holy Grail for instance. Moreover, many people use these terms in their everyday conversations, usually metaphorically. However, the context in which Winterson uses them is always new, unexpected and even shocking. For example, she compares urinals to Holy Grail (22). In addition, she uses the sentence "[t]his place is like ante-chamber to Judgment Day"(46) while describing the waiting room of a sexual health clinic. Just like this, the meaning and the message of well-known words are turned up-side down. Taking these words from their natural lofty context and placing them within a new one, mundane, almost vulgar, she achieves (beside a comic effect) two goals at the same time. On the one hand, she remains within a safe area where every reader can understand her, on the other hand, she gets a chance to shake up her audience, to shock them into thinking differently, in a non-mainstream manner.

She performs exactly the same trick with Shakespeare's Caliban. He enters the text twice. There is his quote right on the first page. Here Caliban curses his master: "The red plague rid you for learning me your language" (9). Again, it is the context that matters here. Braking through a thick wall of tradition, Winterson does not use this quote in a pejorative manner. Comparing Caliban to her

[28]Bush, Catherine. "Jeanette Winterson." *Bomb* Spring 1993. 14 February 2013

protagonist, who learned the language of true love from Louise and now is left alone with no one to speak to, she actually expresses pity towards this creature who has been perceived as a villain by most people ever since Shakespeare has created him. Later, Caliban appears one more time and with the same quote (16). Again, Winterson compares him to the protagonist and sympathizes with him. Consequently, the reader is assigned a task to rethink clichés. At the same time, through these allusions Shakespeare's work gains a new meaning. In a very inconspicuous way, Winterson makes it clear that old texts are never worn out of meaning. It is us who lose the ability to find it in them.

Here it is important to point out the close connection between the motif of art and life in the book and the center theme that can be put as love without boundaries and without gender. In *Written on the Body* Winterson creates "[a] space in a text into which a male or female consciousness can enter and be redefined"[29] and thus questions an absolute nature of gander and whether it should be a defining issue in such an undoubtedly absolute matter as love. Her application of allusions in the text is as genderless as her protagonist. Sometimes she/he compares herself/himself to Rumpelstiltskin (44), another time to Vronsky (75) and even to a "seed of pomegranate" (91) from the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This device helps her to overstep the boundary of "mainstream vision of the world"[30] and to evoke in her readers an emotion that is as strong and pure as it is genderless. Therefore, the reader is forced to see the category of gender as a mere cover, under which a deeper meaning exists: the meaning of true feelings and universal passions.

However, Winterson's idea of story as a human device to see and explain ourselves does not exhaust itself by an endless flow of allusions in *Written on the Body*. There are many other kinds of stories besides literary and biblical. For example, there are certain historical events, towards which we all share a common sentiment. She uses the image of Columbus first sighting the Americas to express the feelings of her protagonist who understands that she/he is falling in love for the first time (52). Sometimes, though, Winterson leaves the firm ground of common knowledge and explains feelings of the protagonist using anecdotes, which have their roots in various fields, but mostly in history and science. For instance, to explain the feelings of the protagonist who has just learned that Louise has leukemia she describes the feelings of someone who is two hundred miles above the earth where there is no gravity (100). In addition, she reveals that stories do not necessarily have to be written.

[29]Ibid.
[30]Ibid.

When Louise tells the protagonist that she cannot fully trust her/him because of her/his eventful love history, it is the picture on the wall ("Love and Pilgrim" by Burne-Jones) that helps the protagonist to realize "the hugeness of it all" (54). In other words, the picture helps the protagonist to understand the intensity and value of the situation between them as well as the scale of sacrifice that she/he has to make to this new love.

Furthermore, there are endless stories from the protagonist's past that mainly have to do with her/his failed relationships. In her preface to a new addition of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* Winterson explains why her novels never have chronological composition: saying that "[w]e neither live nor think like this"[31]. In *Written on the Body* the plot line is repeatedly interrupted by the protagonist's digressions into various issues, but also by the recollections of her/his past. The reader has an impression that he or she gets into the protagonist's head and follows the inconsistent torrent of her thoughts. A magazine article about marital infidelity makes her/him remember the Alfred Kinsey's assertion that most women prefer to have sex in the afternoon. That assertion, in its turn, makes her/him remember the lover who worked in the Botanical Gardens in Oxford and "could only achieve orgasm between the hours of two and five o'clock" (75). These memories, which form a loosely connected chain in the book, give the reader a notion of the protagonist's past, but more importantly, they are there to demonstrate yet another one of Winterson's ideas about human nature.

This kind of narration sends us back to the modernist stream of consciousness and the attention of modernist writers to the psychological processes. In her interviews as well as in *Art Objects* (that can easily be described as a tribute to modernist writers and especially to Virginia Woolf) Winterson mentions her affection for this literary movement. In Winterson's novel, the numerous flashbacks have a very important function. They show that just like myth and archetypes in the unconscious, the past never dies and never disappears from within people: "The power of memory is such that it can lift reality for a time. Or is memory the more real place?" (61). The events of human life assume their significance as the time passes. Slowly people turn them into meaningful stories. People recall them and live through them again to understand the events of the present and to make their choices for the future. Thus, again through stories, a person's past, present and future are brought together in *Written on the Body.*

[31] Winterson, Jeanette. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.* London: Vintage Books, 1996. Page 4

In addition, from this perspective literary allusions in the text acquire a new, metafictional, meaning. Winterson creates a certain link with the literature of the past and possibly future by using them in her novel. In *Art Objects* she writes that she cannot do new work without known work[32] and basically asserts that new literature cannot exist without a strong base of tradition under it. *Written on the Body,* which deals with the issues of time and continuity in so many different ways, as self-conscious narrative states the unbreakable connection between literary epochs and traditions. For Winterson it is also very important that her work will outlive her[33] and will be cited as well and thus will become another precious link in an endless chain.

It is easy to notice that while being stylistically rather unusual *Written on the Body* has a routine plot line. Under a cover of intertextual allusions, flashbacks, reinvented clichés and genderless narration, there is a well-known story of love that overcomes all the obstacles and not even threaten by the shadow of terminal illness. The reader, actually, can get an impression that he or she is being told the same old story, but in a very unusual way. The way that opens new sides to this story. Undoubtedly, one of Winterson's goals is a "deconstruction of the romance genre"[34] that, at the same time, preserves the romantic notion of love as a moving force of our lives. Here it is important to come back to the notion of clichés and the way the book treats them. It has been mentioned above that Winterson does not want to get rid of them once and forever. She merely wants to refresh their meaning, to remind the reader that "things become clichés because they mean something to us"[35]. At the beginning of the book it is said that the phrase "I love you" is "always a quotation" (9) that it is in fact one of the most overused clichés ever. Nevertheless, it does not mean that it has lost its meaning. We have just been using it in the wrong context. In the context of pink cuddly toys and meaningless greetings cards (10), which discredited "I love you". The same can be pointed out about the genre of romance: "Developing as a popular, sometimes supernatural counterpoint to literary realism in the nineteen century, the romance developed into a mass market industry in the twentieth century"[36].

[32]Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects*. London: Vintage Books, 1996. Page 172
[33]Bush, Catherine. "Jeanette Winterson." *Bomb* Spring 1993. 14 February 2013
[34]Andermahr, Sonya. *Jeanette Winterson.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Page 76
[35]Bush, Catherine. "Jeanette Winterson." *Bomb* Spring 1993. 14 February 2013
[36]Andermahr, Sonya. *Jeanette Winterson.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Page 80

In *Written on the Body* Winterson struggles to prove that although so many good and bad books were written about love and thus the whole notion of a love story was turned into a pathetic cliché, it is still possible for literature to tell love stories that will sink deep into a readers' heart. Therefore, the protagonist in the book longs for a new, fresh expression of her/his feelings. Besides narrating the story in a stylistically unusual manner, Winterson (and her protagonist) find help in the field of medicine: "Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love poem to Louise" (111). Thus, Winterson introduces something entirely new to the genre of romance: straightforward physicality approached from a very unusual medical perspective. At the same time, when used to describe Louise's cells, tissues, skeleton and so on, the language becomes more poetic than ever before in the book: "I have mapped you with my naked eye and stored you out of sight. The millions of cells that make up your tissues are plotted on my retina. Night flying I know exactly where I am. Your body is my landing strip" (117). Here, by using highly metaphorical language and literal medical terms at the same time, Winterson manages to bring together physical and spiritual. She demonstrates that the border between them is as superficial as gender. That is one of the reasons why throughout the book her language changes from very poetic to almost vulgar: "She had a vast bottom" (143). Also, it is not hard to notice that the love of her characters being a mysterious power that changes their lives is at the same time real, tactile, carnal: "She nuzzles her cunt into my face like a filly at the gate. She smells of the sea" (73). To protect this love the protagonist is not only ready to bury Louise under hundreds of kisses and thousands of elaborate compliments, but also to start an ugly fight with her/his ex-girlfriend: "I should have smoothed things down, parried, instead I slapped her across the face and tore my keys from her pocket. 'That was for the bathroom' I said as she felt her bleeding mouth" (86). Finally, Winterson chooses as a heading for her book one of its most beautiful metaphors: the metaphor of love as a text: "Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights" (89). Thus, love becomes art. Just like a novel, "the secret code" can reveal its mysteries only to those who are ready to search restlessly for them and to accept them. To those who are not ready or not interested literature, text, will always remain meaningless and unnecessary. As a result, in one short metaphor Winterson is able to celebrate a true feeling, which always comes with complications and hard choices, and art, which never reveals its secrets to the indifferent. At the same time, she reveals that both, art and love, as elevated and lofty as they can be are inseparable from "the body" – real, physical, mundane.

# 4 *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* – Autobiography as a Search for Identity.

*Why* is very different from everything that Winterson wrote before it. This book is based on the writer's personal experience that is narrated in simple language. The composition is rather thematic than chronological, but still there is no trace of an experimental approach in the book, except for an extensive use of flashbacks. All this seems to be a strange choice for a writer who became a notorious adherent of an experiment in prose and who strongly disapproves of realistic prose which is based on experience.

"The reality of art is a reality of imagination"[37] - writes Winterson in *Arts Objects*, making it clear that to her the realm of a true artist is his or her inner life and spiritual, rather than direct, physical experience of the world. It is her strong conviction that for an artist to play a role of the "Court photographer"[38] and not to move beyond the "notional life"[39] is a betrayal of his or her calling. However, at the same time, Winterson is not willing to separate reality and imagination entirely, to her this is impossible: "Our real lives hold within them our royal lives; the inspiration to be more than we are, to find new solutions, to live beyond the moment"[40]. It complicates the mission of the artist who has to balance between these seemingly separate worlds, imagination and reality, and to help people to bring them together. To do so the artist should represent a more complicated reality that the one that we can feel with our five senses. In other words, he or she should be experimental. To her, Cazzane's apple is better than a photography of an apple because the artist "[p]aints the whole that it (apple) is, the whole that is lost to us as we pass it, eat it, chop it down"[41]. The artist gives the public a chance to see a familiar object from a new side thus slightly changing the way people see the world generally.

It may seem that with these aesthetic views Winterson should dismiss the genre of autobiography altogether. To all appearances, it has too much to do with notional life to meet her aesthetic standards. However, it is not entirely true. In fact, Winterson seems to be particularly interested in this genre. In *Art Objects* she deals with the genre of autobiography in "Testimony Against Gertrude

[37] Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects*. London: Vintage Books, 1996. Page 133
[38] Ibid., 133
[39] Ibid., 134
[40] Ibid., 143
[41] Ibid., 151

Stein", where she discusses *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* as well as Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* It is not hard to notice that she chooses very unusual works of this genre. These novels do not describe the facts and events of author's life and do not confine to reality. What they try to achieve is a different kind of reality[42]. By "misrepresenting"[43] reality these works give the readers the power to look beyond the routine of everyday life: "Against daily insignificance art recalls to us possible sublimity. It cannot do this if it is merely a reflection of actual life. Our real lives are elsewhere. Art finds them"[44].

Thus, instead of dismissing the genre of autobiography, Winterson sees it as a chance to demonstrate that there is no firm border between reality and imagination. A similar demonstration takes place in *Why*, as Winterson makes it clear throughout the book that human past is not fixed. People always come up with a story to make sense of the events that happened to them, and as one lives further this story might change. Her autobiography, as well as her novels, is a testimony to the fact that reality and imagination work together to create our pasts as well as our personalities.

Actually, Winterson herself insists on not naming *Why* an autobiography or a memoir, but a cover version. "It's always a cover version"[45] - she says in one of her interviews implying that the original exists only in theory, in practice, however, people are constantly recreating their memories. The motif of writing and rewriting life as fiction appears in all her books. In *Why* it is present from the first chapter, "The Wrong Crib", which serves as an introduction and deals, among other things, with *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.* Winterson says that in her first semi-autobiographical novel she came up with a story she could live with[46], inventing it not only for her readership, but, more importantly, for herself. *Why* can be seen as another attempt to do the same, but this time Winterson does not feel the need to use fairy tales and fictional characters. Also, this time she is willing to investigate into her own creative method and find out why fiction and not facts, imagination and not reality, has become foundation stones of her work. In her novels, Winterson has always tried to define experience through imagination, but here for the first time she endeavors to define imagination through experience. Just like all her other books *Why* is a quest. This time Winterson

[42] Ibid., 49
[43] Ibid., 54
[44] Ibid., 59
[45] Author Interview @ Amazon with Jeanette Winterson 01.02 (video)
[46] Winterson, Jeanette. *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*. New York: Grove Press, 2011. Page 6
All the subsequent quotes are from this edition and are marked in parenthesis in the text.

seeks an answer to the question: “Why do I write as I do?” (41).

The composition of the book is thematic, but at the same time, its structure roughly mirrors the chronology of Winterson’s life. The first part, which ends with “An Intermission”, chapter by chapter shows the reader different spheres of her life as a child and teenager: home, church, school, library. All these places, as well as all the important people in her life made their contribution to her art. Winterson’s adopted mother is one of the most important characters in the book. Mrs. Winterson devoted her life to Elim Pentecostal Church. A rigid and controlling person, she struggles to turn her daughter into a missionary. Things, however, turn out differently. Instead of living her mother’s dream Jeanette chooses to live her own life, which includes being a lesbian. When Mrs. Winterson realizes that she is not going to be able to bring Jeanette back under control, she makes Jeanette leave home with a proclamation: “You’re no daughter of mine” (111). However, it was not a big tragedy for a 16-year-old girl; in fact, she was already prepared to go: “It hardly mattered. It was too late for lines like that now. I had a language of my own and it wasn’t hers” (112). Indeed, it was a hard-won trophy.

Early in the book, Winterson says that we get our language through the language of others (9). This statement is as literal as it is metaphorical. Of course, children learn how to speak mainly form their parents, but it is not only language that they learn, but also the way of thinking. “My mother was in charge of language” (27) - Winterson starts the third chapter, and by using the phrase “in charge” she makes it clear: language, knowledge and thought were matters of open and conscious control in their household. No books except for the Bible and a few other religious works were allowed at their home. Mrs. Winterson was very well aware of the fact that books can put her authority in danger, as books contain ideas and ideas can change lives: “The trouble with a book is that you never know what’s in it until it’s too late” (33). To save her daughter from unwanted ideas she even changed the ending of *Jane Eyre,* which Mrs. Winterson read to Jeanette when she was a little girl. In this new version the protagonist of the novel ends up being a missionary. When Jeanette learned how to read, Mrs. Winterson could no longer exercise control over the books’ endings and messages, so she banned them from the house. She did not want her daughter’s life to take any unexpected turns and when she discovered a pile of books under Jeanette’s matrass, she burned all of them. When the fire died down, Jeanette found countless bits of text in the yard and she collected some of them. This frightening episode leads the author to an insight into her writing style: “It is probably why I write

as I do – collecting the scraps, uncertain of continuous narrative" (41). Certainly, her tendency towards unchronological and highly fragmented organization of the text is not the only consequence of an unhappy childhood. More importantly, an endless confrontation with Mrs. Winterson and her values made Jeanette long for control over her own life and thought. She realized very early that this could be achieved through language: "Words became clues. Piece by piece I knew they would lead me somewhere else" (101). She turned to books, to endless stories that they contain, to run away from her mother's authority: "Books, for me, are a home. Books don't make a home – they are one, in the sense that just as you do with a door you open a book, and you go inside. Inside there is a different kind of time and a different kind of space" (61). Books gave her a chance to see the world from a new angle. Sometimes Winterson's passages about books and reading certainly do sound escapist, as, for example, this one: "Writers are often exiles, outsiders, runaways and castaways. These writers were my friends" (116), but the truth is she has never chosen a passive escapism as a way to live her life. Along with realizing the importance of speaking her own language that is the importance of being in control of her own life and mind, she understood that gaining complete control requires not just reading others' stories, but writing one's own: "It's why I am a writer – I don't say 'decided' to be, or 'became'. It was not an act of will or even a conscious choice. To avoid the narrow mesh of Mrs. Winterson's story I had to be able to tell my own" (5). Therefore, it was a desperate need to escape from her mother's perspective on life and to get a new one that contributed greatly to her becoming a writer.

Ironically enough, Mrs. Winterson managed to stimulate her adopted daughter's creativity in some other ways as well. The Bible, which was introduced to Winterson's life by her mother, played a crucial role in the writer's development. It was through the Bible that she first felt the power of words. The Bible is full of miracle stories and parables, which made sense to Jeanette even though the book was written hundreds of years ago. It helped her realize that unlike physical objects words do last and thus she got her notion of eternal power of imagination: "My mother was a good reader, confident and dramatic. She read the Bible as though it had just been written – and perhaps it was like that for her. I got a sense early on that the power of a text is not time bound. The words go on doing their work" (27). In addition, she insists that the language of the Bible presented her with the "connection to four hundred years of the English language" (28), as Kings James Version that became a standard dates as far as 1611. Thus, Shakespeare could not be a hard reading for someone who started with the Bible, and Winterson sees it as a great advantage. Miracle stories along with

complicated non-colloquial language will become defining features of her fiction. Surprisingly enough, one of the books that Mrs. Winterson allowed at her household was *Morte d'Arthur* by Thomas Mallory, which also contains many miracle stories, but even more importantly, it contains one of the most known quests in world literature. Winterson assigns great significance to the influence that the book had on her, pointing out that all the quests that are so frequent in her work go back to the Perceval's quest for the Holy Grail (37).

Winterson also insists that her working class background had a significant influence on her as a writer: "A working class tradition is an oral one, not a bookish one, but its richness of language comes from absorbing some of the classics in school – they all learned by rote – and by creatively using language to tell a good story. I think back and realize that our stock of words was not small and we loved images" (30). One cannot but notice some degree of idealization of the working class community that is certainly taking place in *Why*. Nevertheless, it is certain that oral tradition of storytelling as well as frequent quoting and misquoting of classical English literature (28) did influence Winterson a lot and gave her an impression that human life is literally made of stories.

After eleven chapters that deal with the author's childhood and puberty comes a very short unnumbered chapter – "An Intermission". It is focused on time and indeed the theme of time will become dominant through the rest of the book. Following in Kant's steps, Winterson draws a distinction between clock time and what she calls "total time" (153) – our inner time, which is close to absence of time, as there is no past, present and future inside us: "Events separated by years lie side by side imaginatively and emotionally" (153). Winterson prefers to see her life through a prism of imagination rather than through a prism of linear time: "I would rather go on reading myself as a fiction than as a fact" (154). One could think that "An Intermission" is a chapter for those who so far were trying to read *Why* as a non-fiction book of facts and events. This chapter makes it clear that *Why* is an autobiography of soul, where the events of inner life carry far more weight that the events that took place in the outer world. This approach allows Winterson to skip twenty five years and move the story to the year 2007 when she starts looking for her birth mother. Here the search for the roots of her writing method is slowly transforming into a search for identity as such. However, it is important to mention that Winterson never actually separates these two notions: "It isn't a method, it's me" (157) – she puts it. Nevertheless, it cannot escape the reader's notice that in the second part Winterson does not focuses on her writing approach any more, she merely looks into

it to find more truth about her personality as such.

After a painful breakup with her girlfriend and during her nervous breakdown that follows, Winterson realizes that there is only one way for her to recover, and that is through confronting the "lost loss" (161)– her birth mother. Following Freud's tradition, she thinks that she had built her whole identity on denying the significance of the adoption and finally the moment came when this repressed issue destroyed her identity: "My time was up. The person who had left home at sixteen and blasted through all the walls in her way, and been fearless, and not looked back, and who was well known as a writer […] that Jeanette Winterson person was done" (168). However, Winterson thinks that she did not manage to ban the adoption issue from all spheres of her life. It was her fiction where the lost loss has always been in control: "I have written love narratives and loss narratives - stories of longing and belonging. It all seems so obvious now – the Wintersonic obsession of love, loss and longing. It is my mother. It is my mother" (160). Therefore, looking into her own writing helps Winterson to find out who she really is. Also, in *Why* creativity in general is regarded as a force that helps people to restore harmony: "Creativity is on the side of health – it isn't the thing that drives us mad; it is the capacity in us that tries to save us from madness" (171). Therefore, at the worst time of her breakdown and during the long period when she was struggling against bureaucracy to find her birth mother Winterson works tirelessly. She writes many children stories and a whole book for children *The Battle of the Sun* (2009). Simultaneously, she is writing *Why*: "When I began this book I had no idea how it would turn out. I was writing in real time. I was writing the pas and discovering the future" (226). Therefore, the book becomes a certain kind of instrument that helps her to make sense of everything that happened both long time ago and quite recently. When Winterson faces a formidable task of reinventing her identity she resorts to something she has a strong faith in – to art, and through it she finds a way out. Undoubtedly, her life had made quite a remarkable story, but the reason for this does not lie in the events of this life that are, of course, very unusual. Above all, Winterson's "cover story" turned out so well because she herself, being a great storyteller, made it to. She turned the otherwise meaningless chain of events into a deep and thoughtful book, same as she turned her own life into a fascinating quest. *Why* can be viewed as an appeal to the readers to do the same.

# 5 *Art & Lies* as a Creative Statement of Winterson's Aesthetic Principles

In *Art & Lies* Winterson once again blurs the borderline between prose and poetry. It is a very ambiguous novel that allows an infinite number of interpretations as nothing is stated clearly in it. Even the characters, as Winterson puts it, "are not characters in the physical sense that we know them on the street or perhaps even in our own lives. They are consciousness"[47]. In other words, the characters are not fully described as human beings. The reader knows very little about their physical appearance or their background. The events of their lives are told only if they are relevant to the metaphysical dilemmas that the characters are dealing with. In *Art Objects,* material world is being referred to as "the world of shadows"[48] and this is exactly how the material world is presented in the novel. The events of physical existence become a mere shadow of the decisions and choices the characters make in their minds, the focus of the author's attention being not the notional life of her protagonists, but their spiritual existence.

There are three protagonists in the book – Handel, Picasso and Sappho. Besides, there is Doll Sneerpiece who is the main character in the story that each of the protagonists reads at some point in the book. Not only does the narrative structure connect the three characters, but also they are connected through the text of this half-comic, half-pornographic novel, which each of them judges according to her or his disposition and aesthetic preferences. Each protagonist represents a certain model of living life and understanding art, and each of these three models has its faults and strengths. Furthermore, all three characters are interconnected either on a physical (Handel and Picasso) or metaphysical (Picasso and Sappho) level. Eventually, they all meet at the end of the book to have a very ambiguous conversation. As the book's title as well as the names of the characters suggest protagonist's aesthetic ideas, their thoughts on art and its importance occupy the central place in the book. To take a closer look at how each character defines the role of art and its connection to life, it is necessary to analyze them individually.

## 5.1 Handel

Handel is the sole male protagonist in the book. Through him Winterson expresses her pessimistic

[47] Andermahr, Sonya. *Jeanette Winterson.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Page 87
[48] Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects*. London: Vintage Books, 1996. Page 135

view on the social aspects of the modern world. One year later, some of Handel's ideas on mass culture, consumption and democracy will become an important part of Winterson's book of essays *Art Objects*. Handel, as well as Winterson, sees the main problem of the modern world in a simple fact that it has become a place where the material is far more important than the spiritual, where the soul is out of fashion[49]. Under these circumstances, art becomes a refuge for the soul and Handel is a great admirer of art, but, unlike all the other book's protagonists, he is not engaged in any kind of creative activity. Handel is a cancer surgeon and a Catholic. As a young man, he sang in a church and was going to become a priest. Thus, in his character three approaches to the world are examined: religion, science and art.

Handel is a disillusioned (106) man whose past is full of wrong choices. He takes a train to the coast because he feels bitterly disappointed in the way he has chosen to live his life. As he rides the train, the memories of his wrong choices come back to him. He does not recall things chronologically, though, as human memory does not work like this. Rather, he moves from less painful memories that lie on the surface to the bitterest and the deepest that he thought he had forgotten long ago. He hopes that the journey will help him to find an answer to the question "How shall I live?" (25) To find the right answer he has to go through all the wrong answers he has given before. Science is dealt with first; it is heavily criticized through the first two chapters devoted to Handel. According to him, it gives people a certain kind of knowledge, but not the essential one. Science is focused on physical things, just like the world that glorifies science. It can make people healthier and it can give them more years to live, but what it fails to give them is happiness and inner harmony: "The doctor's surgery is full of men and women who do not know why they are unhappy" (8). Along with science, Handel undermines the notion of progress as such: "I will admit that we have better scientists, if by better, we agree that they are more than their dead colleagues. But if we ask, are they more ethical, more socially aware, more disciplined, more relevant to the happiness of the whole, then our scientists have failed the age they claim they have created" (107). Thus, the critic of science becomes the critic of the modern Western civilization whose whole mythology is based on the notion of progress.

Religion is coming into focus in a slower manner and Handel is less confident talking about it. When

[49] Winterson, Jeanette. *Art & Lies*. London: Vintage Books, 1995. Page 113
All the subsequent quotes are from this edition and are marked in parenthesis in the text.

he asks himself a question about religion he does not seem to be able to give a definite and complete answer, as it happens with science. Often he resorts to metaphors: "When a woman chooses me above my numerous atheist colleagues we have an understanding straight away. I have done well, perhaps because a man with God inside him is still preferable to a man with only his breakfast inside him" (9). Although Handel did not become a priest, he remains a firm believer and faith does not belong among his wrong choices, as even at the end of the book when Handel is saved and forgiven, he remains a Catholic. What seems to have been an obstacle to his career as a priest is his disillusionment with the Church and with the clergy: "That is why I left the Church, not the teachings of Christ, but the dogmas of Man" (186). He also could not put up with the fact that in its own subtle manner institutional religion tends to create divisions, one of them being a sharp line between the clergy, who are better people with a right to judge, and ordinary believers, who are uncertified by the Church and therefore have no such right. Handel used to say "I'm sorry" (98) far too often while hearing a confession, he could not believe in his own authority: "It's so easy for the Voice of God to sound just like my own, plus forte!" (100) Eventually, Handel leaves the Church to become a doctor, but only to grow disappointed in science years later.

Nevertheless, there is something else that accompanies him through all his life – and it is art, which he loves passionately. Moreover, Winterson implies that Handel's decision not to pursue a singer's career belongs to one of the greatest mistakes of his life. The man "with the musical voice" (111), whose mother was a musician and who spent his happiest moments singing opera pieces to his platonic lover, he knows deep inside that the "secret of life is art" (204), but he was never been able to give all of himself to it.

Handel does not only enjoy art emotionally and aesthetically, he attributes to it a great metaphysical value. While science is always busy with the physical world and the Church "has found it convenient to place all that is sinful in the excesses of the flesh and all that is right in the restraint of spirit" (112), art does not divide physical and spiritual. An artist finds beauty and inspiration in the physical world; he or she is able to find meaning and value in mundane matters. Art does not want a person to choose between physical and spiritual, it allows one to be both thus leading one to harmony and giving the best answers to the eternal questions.

Among Handel's greatest mistakes belongs also his decision to turn down the love of a young woman, his student. He did it because of "mild prejudices" (113), his "doubtful faith" (113) and

"shy jabs at passion" (113), in other words, in those days he also used to associate physical love and passion with sin and evil. While riding the train, Handel realizes that having fled beauty and rejected love he condemned himself to an unhappy life: "How do I spend my days? Not by the living body but by the marble slab, black arts of scalpel and blade, dissection of what I love" (113). Thus, Handel's medical profession becomes a metaphor of his sterile existence devoid of any warmth.

The ending of the Handel's line is rather self-explanatory: "He began to sing. […] His voice was strong and light. The sun was under his tongue. He was a man of infinite space" (206). Handel is saved through art, which does not divide the world into parts but absorbs it as a whole, in all its beauty and ugliness, thus creating harmony between the extremes.

## 5.2 Picasso

While in the chapters devoted to Handel Winterson expresses her unfavorable views on the modern consumer society as a whole, in chapters devoted to Picasso it is the nuclear family and the institution of marriage that are heavily criticized[50]. In Picasso's story, the border line between her past and present is blurred and it is only with great effort that we can reconstruct the chronology of her life. Nevertheless, it is obvious that it was the author's intention for this story to contain many autobiographical elements. The most significant similarity is suggested at the very end of the book, when the three protagonists meet and the reader gets to know that Picasso is an adopted child.
Picasso is a daughter of a Spanish servant who used to work in her adoptive family's house. It is not clear from the book how and when she learns about her origin. Nevertheless, having Spanish blood in her veins, Picasso does not feet into her adoptive family on a very deep, one might say, genetic level: "This woman (her mother), sun-brown, sun-lights in her brown hair, had one gift and her gift was life. Horror then, to find work in a charnel house, serving the needs of the dead" (205). In addition, it is hard not to notice the resemblance between Picasso's adoptive mother and Mrs. Winterson: "She saw herself, young, kind, overworked, patient, neglected by her own husband and abused by a silent toddler who would not understand that bananas are the only fruit" (41). More importantly, the role which art plays in Picasso's life is very similar to the one that books played in Winterson's, which was described in detail in the chapter devoted to *Why*. At the beginning of the first chapter about Picasso, there is written that "colors became her talismans" (40). Art as a powerful

[50] Andermahr, Sonya. *Jeanette Winterson*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Page 92

force and art works as sacred objects is a recurrent theme not only in Winterson's novels, but also in her interviews: "It was actually books that started to make those pockets of freedom, which I hadn't otherwise experienced. I do see them as talismans, as sacred objects. I see them as something that will protect me, I suppose, that will save me from things that I feel are threatening"[51]. Therefore, it seems natural to draw parallels between Picasso's and Winterson's experience with art.

Just like Winterson was forbidden to read fiction, Picasso is forbidden to draw. However, while Winterson's household was controlled by her mother, in Picasso's case it is her cold and despotic farther who tries to suppress his daughter's talent and her whole personality. The house where Picasso lives with her parents as well as her brother who sexually abuses her on a daily basis becomes a symbol of dysfunctional family life. There are two staircases in the house. The first is the public one, which her whole family uses: "They have climbed it step by step and they do believe that it is the only way up through the house" (41). The second is her private staircase. It symbolizes her resistance to her family's rules and values: "Not a single tread of this easy public route has been laid by me" (41).

Winterson uses the metaphor of death to describe Picasso's family members who refuse to live a full happy life choosing to be guided by clichés and pretense: "Death did part them; dead to feeling, dead to beauty, dead to all but the most obvious pleasures, they were soon dead to one another and each blamed the other for the boredom that was theirs" (83). The life of these "corpses" (158) is just like their house: beautiful from the outside, but empty and stifling inside. Thus, Picasso finds herself in an endless struggle with her family for the right to be alive, which to her means to be an artist and to live an authentic life: "To get beyond everyone else's lies I shall have to cut a figure of my own" (162). This is impossible unless she leaves her house and her family forever, which she finally does, overcoming all her fears. Unlike Handel, boarding the train Picasso already knows how she wants to live. She knows that she is an artist and a lesbian, and she is determined to be herself to her dying day. Therefore, just like for Winterson, for Picasso art becomes salvation. Through art, she finds enough strength and courage to make her own choice. She escapes her past and takes a train to her future: "I will not be what I was" (93).

[51] Bilger, Audrey. "Jeanette Winterson, the Art of Fiction." *Paris Review* Winter 1997. 14 February 2013

In addition, through Picasso Winterson expresses one of her most favorite aesthetic ideas: art is not a mirror of life. Picasso refuses to accept her father's opinion that art has to be realistic: "My father had often encouraged me to paint likeness and I had often asked him why he wanted a likeness when the thing was there" (161). She is convinced that true art is not a reflection of an object fixed in time. True art is born inside the artist and reflects his or her spiritual world being only loosely connected to the physical world. Art as a spiritual experience defeats time and becomes immortal, as well as the one who is able to recognize and appreciate it: "The more she looked at pictures the more she saw them as extraordinary events, perpetual events, not objects fixed by time. In the rambly old text books there was talk of "The divine" (39). A year later Winterson will develop this idea in *Art Objects*.

## 5.3 Sappho

The main theme of the chapters devoted to Sappho (here the ancient poet is actually meant) is art. Here again Winterson expresses ideas that she will elaborate on one year later in *Art Objects.* In these chapters, the reader repeatedly comes across the refrain that gave the book its name: "There's no such thing as autobiography there's only art and lies" (69, 141). This short phrase is Winterson's protest against realism in art. At a certain point in her long soliloquy, Sappho mentions the art of Ancient Greece: "They knew that life gains from art not only spirituality, depth of thought and feeling, soul turmoil or soul peace, but that she can form herself on the very lines and colours of art, […]. Hence came the objection to realism. […] They felt that it inevitably makes people ugly and they were perfectly right" (131-132). Sappho, and Winterson with her, believes that realistic art lacks spiritual a dimension. To her it is impotent in the sense that it cannot elevate one's soul. Furthermore, Sappho goes as far as claiming that realistic art does not exist: "It is not simply that I shall lie, but that I shall not be able to tell the truth" (138). Any version of reality that an artist is willing to present is subjective. Whether he or she realizes it or not, an artist puts a little bit of himself or herself in every fact, in every story. Moreover, according to Sappho, it mostly happens consciously, which turns facts into intentional lies: "The search for the truth is tainted with willing falsehoods. The biographer, hand on heart, violates the past" (140). Thus for Sappho, any piece of art that tries to imitate reality is bound to be a lie. True art, according to her, has to raise above reality. In other words, it has to work like a metaphor or a symbol. Allowing multiple interpretations, true art does not stop at describing a cover, but tries to reach for the true nature of things: "The word

that rises above itself. The word that is itself and more. The associative word light with meaning. [...] The word unlied" (137). The tragic story of Sappho is a story of an artist who is not remembered for her art, but for her life, mostly for being a lesbian. To her a genre of autobiography becomes a symbol of detrimental human obsession with facts, an anti-art.

Winterson's Sappho exists out of time. She never actually died. Sappho constantly moves between the past, present and future. The past is presented through multiple flashbacks to ancient times. The disastrous present situation of humanity is also vividly described: "The world is a charnel house racked with the dead. The dead have no need for words, no desires that appetite cannot satisfy" (64). There are, of course, apocalyptic visions of the future: "He turned away and I turned with him in vivid heat to look on the sun-dried world. The groves and towers were gone. The Word was gone. […] Ignorant of alchemy they put their faith in technology and turned the whole world into the gold. The dead and shone" (57). As Sappho moves between different times, she repeats T.S. Eliot's words: "That which is only living can only die" (64). This second refrain is aimed at criticizing material values and the degradation of spiritual world. Sappho reminds people that their bodies will always remain mortal, but their inner life can overcome mortality, and that is through art: "Art defeats Time" (67). Thus, there is a simple answer to the question of why Sappho never died: she is a true artist.

In fact, there is a chance that all three protagonists managed to defeat time. In other words, their bodies died, but not their souls: "However, throughout the text there is strong evidence that all three characters are in fact dead and the reader's gradual realization that this is an afterlife journey through the world of art and the imagination makes for a decidedly unsettling if not bleak, resolution"[52]. Indeed, the final meeting of Handel, Picasso and Sappho does not, by any means, look like something that really happened to real people. Winterson does not give any details on where and when this meeting happened; she also avoids internal monologues and does not describe emotions. It is not clear whether the meeting was intentional and planned or not.

It is important to understand that each one of the protagonists at a certain point in the book had an epiphany that saved his or her soul. In Handel's case, the epiphany comes at the very end of the book when he is finally able to see his wrong choices and accept art as the only true purpose of his

[52] Andermahr, Sonya. *Jeanette Winterson*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Page 95

life. For Picasso, the epiphany comes when she tries to commit suicide. She realizes that she has to devote her life to painting and, in order to do so, she has to become free and to leave her parent's house for good. Sappho's epiphany is her encounter with Sophia (Picasso) – "the ninth muse" (65). If one follows this logic a little bit further, characters' meeting and their obscure conversation in the last chapter can be seen as an author's attempt to lead her reader to an epiphany. Here one is probably supposed to realize that nothing that was described before was meant literally or "realistically" that all the characters were no more than symbols and abstractions that can mean different things to different people. Eventually, the novel is liberated from any link to the real world, its logic or its facts. The novel ends with the score for Strauss' *The Knight of the Rose*. It changes into music, which is the most romantic of all arts because it is the most abstract.

# 6 Conclusion

In this thesis, three novels by Jeanette Winterson were studied in order to comprehend the writer's aesthetic position and the way it is reflected in her work. The plot, the composition, the characters as well as the narrative devices of the three novels were analyzed to achieve this aim. As a result, three different approaches to the theme of art and life were demonstrated. These approaches are realized through three different types of writing: lyrical novel, autobiographical novel and philosophical novel.

In *Written on the Body* the relationship between art and love form a very important theme. Nevertheless, here it is developed in a subtler manner than in other two novels. In the novel art is not discussed directly and the author's position does not lie on the surface. To a great degree, the significance of this theme in the novel depends on a personal interpretation. The theme of art and life enters the novel through an endless flow of intertextual allusions and through metaphors (including the metaphor that has become the book's title: the metaphor of love as a text).

The role of the allusions in the text is to demonstrate Winterson's idea that human life is to a large extent composed of a fictional texture and that one's understanding of the world around and the world inside him or her depends on stories and archetypes. Whether people realize where these stories are coming from or not, they form a very important part of one's personality. In Winterson's philosophy, Jung's ideas on collective unconscious and archetypes are mixed with her aesthetic views and that leads her to the conclusion that human life is not only influenced, but also shaped by fiction. In the novel, she makes the readers to confront the information that is stored deep inside them in order to appeal to very simple and basic knowledge that is at the same time very powerful and emotionally charged. Thus, she manages to establish a very direct and very personal contact with her reader. By using allusions to the well-known stories in an unexpected context as well as vivid and straightforward imagery, she tries to shock people out of their usual understanding of life into something fresh. She wants her readers to see the things from a new angle, believing that a mere changing of perspective can make a person happier.

*Why* is a much more straightforward text than *Written on the Body*. Here the theme of art is developed in the numerous metafictional passages through which the author's position becomes clear. Nevertheless, the ideas on art that Winterson expresses here are very similar to those that she

has already developed in *Written on the Body*. She also emphasizes the art's power to transform human life. This time it is her life that was changed completely by books that became her only friends and helped her to survive through a very unhappy childhood. In the Bible, which was nearly a single book that Mrs. Winterson allowed in the house, in the stories heard from different members of church community, in the working class oral tradition and in the books borrowed secretly from the public library she sees the reason why she became a writer as well as the roots of her writing style.

In addition, in *Why* Winterson undermines the notions of facts and factual history. She calls her autobiography a "cover version" implying that the original exists only in theory. In practice, however, people are constantly recreating their memories and therefore no biography or autobiography can be factual. She says that *Why* is just another interpretation of her life and work and maybe the time will come when she will have to offer herself a new interpretation. Here the idea of human life as fiction is considered from a new angle. Not only is one's life formed by stories stored deep in one's personality, but also one has a desperate need to view his or her life as a story. By turning life into a story, a person makes it meaningful. Winterson says that this fictionalizing generally happens on an unconscious level; however, on a conscious level we tend to see a story as a fact, which is wrong but very human.

*Art & Lies* is similar to *Written on the Body* in its ambiguity. Being on the border line between prose and poetic lyricism, the novel can allow different interpretations. Nevertheless, it is clear that the theme of art is central to this novel and all the aspects of the relationship between art and life that were mentioned before get their development in this work.

In *Art & Lies* each protagonist represents a certain model of living life and understanding art, and each of these three models has its faults and strengths. The protagonists of the book are not fully described as human beings. The reader knows very little about their physical appearance or their background. The events of their lives get told only if they are relevant to the metaphysical dilemmas that the characters are dealing with. Their journey to the coast can be seen as a journey toward a happy and authentic life. They have different distances to travel. The reader finds Handel completely lost and deeply unhappy, therefore he has many lessons to learn. On the other hand, Picasso has already found her way in life when the book starts and the reader sees her moving in the right direction but still unsure of her choices. At the same time, "the wisest" Sappho has already

understood all the important things and she only has to find her love (Picasso). The lesson that each of the protagonists has to learn is that notional life is not as important as the life of spirit. Art here becomes salvation for Handel and Picasso, it helps them to realize who they really are and how they should live their lives.

Sappho repeats again and again one phrase ("There's no such thing as autobiography there's only art and lies") that brings us back to the problem of fact and truth. This phrase is Winterson's protest against realism in art. Sappho, and Winterson with her, believes that realistic art lacks spiritual dimension. To her it is impotent in the sense that it cannot elevate one's soul. Furthermore, Sappho goes as far as claiming that realistic art does not exist as any version of reality that an artist is willing to present is subjective. In *Art & Lies* Winterson touches upon almost every aspect of her aesthetic system and therefore it can be seen as a creative statement of Winterson's aesthetic principles

To sum up, the three novels are based on Winterson's aesthetic position that was described in detail in the theoretical part. However, at the same time each novel adds a new aspect to the complex problem of the relationship between art and life. I like the fact that to her this relationship is strong and direct. Today people often need an explanation as to why reading books is important. Undoubtedly, Winterson sees it as her mission to explain to the modern people that there is a spiritual side to our existence. Restlessly does she try to remind us that having money cannot guarantee happiness; one has to cultivate his or her soul in order to achieve peace and harmony. I think that Winterson's novels accomplish her aesthetic mission beautifully. They make one think and this is the best a book can do. Nevertheless, I believe that her theoretical essays and articles on art, being full of bright ideas, lack consistency and sensitivity. One gets the impression that in these essays Winterson tends to oversimplify things and to thrust her opinion on her readers. However, her novels are without these weaknesses. Their profound insights into human nature and stylistic sophistication make Winterson one of the greatest British writers today.

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